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Ethical Media For PNG

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There are three media issues related to freedom of the media in Papua New Guinea. They are: Why do we have the media at all? Why is media bashing a popular pastime? How are perceptions formed through the media?

Do we need the media? Why? The media: Inform, provide awareness, educate and entertain; protect rights, make responsible assessments of community feelings; protect minority interests; keep leaders honest; support community values, democracy, and freedom.

These are values to which we aspire; they are good and admirable. The concern is not so much that the media informs, educates and entertains. The concern is when the media mis-informs. When it does that, it devalues its role and questions its own integrity and professionalism.

When the media says that it is accountable to the people, it is taking on huge responsibilities. It is really saying that its legitimacy is supported by the community, a community that is amorphous and not well defined; a community that is continuously changing, not only in its physical composition, but also in its cultural dynamics. It's a big call to be accountable to the community. To do this properly, the media must be independent of the government and major interest groups, but be accountable to an independent body outside of itself. In other words, the media must become transparent.

A free media does not mean freedom for all, or that the media can do whatever it wants without any limits. The media must be guided by community norms and values. It cannot exist in a social vacuum. A responsible media is a representative media because it attempts to be fair to all views, not only the vocal ones.

How can the media speak up for the silent majority? And if it does, can it do it without fear or favour? The media can lead, but can it do it responsibly? The media can play an important role in the development of our country. With potential threats to our democracy and with enormous cultural diversity, Papua New Guinea needs a media that is free, fair and accountable.

The media cannot please everyone. Here, I am not telling you, as media practitioners, anything new. However, because of the type of work you do, it makes you vulnerable to outside scrutiny. This can be particularly so if you don't check all your

facts or talk to all the parties concerned. Those who have failed to be impartial have borne the brunt of some colourful name-calling. But what is far more serious is when your work is scrutinised on ethical grounds. For example, accusations of unethical behaviour hit at the very essence of the media itself, questioning its very credibility and integrity. Accusations that the media has a cynical disregard for individual rights and privacy can devalue the role of the media as a champion of the rights of community. Intruding into the private lives of citizens can be hurtful. However, in many instances the media has a duty to report unethical behaviour by prominent figures. Often the media is also accused of treating mere opinions as truths. This casts doubt on your media professionalism and the intellectual understanding of the issues concerned.

Why is it so easy to bash the media?

There are two simple reasons. Firstly, when the media makes mistakes -- sometimes very bad ones -- it is accused of a lack of balanced reporting or of plain ignorance. That you don't check the facts is bad enough, but that you rely on opinion is a matter of professional laziness. Secondly, when the media is right, it shines like a ship's beacon in the darkness. You become the champion of truth. Truth hurts because it burns the conscience of the guilty. If you have checked your facts and reported accurately without fear or favour, you have the respect of the community. Getting it right is where you make your mark. Remember the journalist who made the scoop on the Sandline debacle? Didn't some of you wish it was you? Being diligent in work is a virtue, but often a difficult one to acquire. I would like to introduce a simple word that describes a good worker. That word is "tenacity".

Tenacity

I think this word best describes what a serious journalist has. Tenacity means being stubborn and persistent, not giving up until you get what you want. It is an attribute that few of us have. A friend once described a journalist he knew as a tenacious hungry wolf tugging stubbornly at the conscience of humanity. Tenacity is a characteristic that describes commitment to duty. It implies following through with your subject of enquiry. It means balanced reporting -- achieved by asking questions, wanting to find things out with a consuming passion for curiosity. It produces a watertight argument that attracts little criticism but inspires enormous debate. I believe that by being tenacious in the profession of journalism, you can minimise media bashing and uphold media freedom with integrity.

Perceptions through the eye of the media

The media creates perceptions: it can influence and change perceptions; control or cudgel opinions. It can direct debate and change views, bash governments and business, question policy and authority, plant seeds of suspicion, wet the appetite for rumour, create nationalism and build confidence, and arouse anger and incite hatred. It has the capability of doing good or harm beyond its own imagination. The media is comprised of journalists — individuals each with their own biases, their own cultural predilections and strong egos, and, sometimes, with attraction to power and control. Every journalist is capable of creating perceptions of PNG here and abroad. As Papua New Guineans, you have not only the responsibility but also the privilege to talk about PNG with a sense of pride but also with truth. Responsibility must be a guiding principle, a core value in the ethics of awareness.

When we create good perceptions about our own country, we create confidence in our people. We become attractive to the people of the world community. We encourage investment in all aspects of business and become a place of desire for others to visit. People from outside will know that PNG is a country where democracy still works. They will also know that many more choices are available to Papua New Guineans than to people in many other countries. The media can help in nation building by talking up PNG rather than talking it down. The media can also tell how PNG really is. You can make PNG beautiful or ugly. It is often said that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Is it not also true that perception is in the beholder's eye? Perceptions through the eye of the media can be complex but also powerful if used properly.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I wish to ask a few questions: Can we ask for simple objectivity from journalists; is there any value in balanced reporting; should we expect journalists to check their facts; should we expect journalists to respect privacy? Media week is not only about ethics and freedom but also about keeping the media alive and kicking.

Freedom is right. So is education and good health. There are many other rights too. But a free media is important for democracy and important for ensuring that the rights of people are not suppressed. However, the media should be careful not to control the community. The media under a dictatorial regime is a tool of submission and a tool of suppression. The press under a democratic system also has its weaknesses: it can undermine

individual rights and invade individual privacy. Real freedom of the press is freedom with responsibility. It calls on journalists to understand the issues very clearly, judge the relative sensitivities of each case, and make remarks or conclusions in a responsible manner. In other words, balanced and responsible reporting must be a core value of an ethical media.

You know you can influence; you know the pen is far mightier than the sword. You can tell the blunt truth or you can stylise the truth. Whatever you do, you must always be aware of your responsibilities to the community. You can inform and educate the community and you can provide knowledge. But, you must allow the people to freely make up their own minds. ■

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